**Contemporary Political Theory**

**Critical Exchange**

**Democratic Renewal and the Spirit of Democracy**

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**Disillusionment and the task of sustaining democracy**

Liberal democracies appear to be off track. But theorists have different and often competing ideas on what is the real challenge to the future of democratic practice. Priorities, analyses, and solutions vary. The success of nationalistic fervors, persistent social and economic inequalities, political apathy among the population, marketisation of executive functions, obsessive money chasing, the legitimacy deficit of political institutions, polarization, weak political parties, low turnouts—these are just some of the issues that have inspired proposals for strengthening the democratic project at local, national, and supranational levels. Yet at times it seems as if extending the chain of problems and solutions has become the end of current debates in democratic theory, resulting in a flurry of ad hoc arguments that are disorganized and actually obfuscate what it means to live in (and sustain) democratic societies. The problem-solving attitude in the study of democracy thus contributes to a sense of urgency, which exaggerates the relevance of circumstantial concerns.

Conforming to this intellectual posture is not without consequences. When our positive judgements on democracy are conditional on observations regarding its capacity to find quick responses to new challenges, we play into the hands of those who seek alternative ways, such as government by a knowledgeable minority, to distribute decision-making power. It also presupposes that what we are meant to expect from democracy under conditions of uncertainty is control of uncertainty rather than an exercise of agency under uncertainty by diverse people. From this perspective, that democracies will face hard times adjusting to changing circumstances does not justify rumination about alternative political configurations but is a starting point to address a radically different question: how can we keep the democratic project going when there is wide-spread disillusionment with democracy?

Taking seriously the task of sustaining the democratic project requires debunking pessimism, thinking critically about what constitutes the distinctive character of democracy, and taking a future-oriented perspective on democratic transformations. In recent years, however, such forward-looking conceptions of democratic progress, especially as the normative ground of broader emancipatory projects, have been met with criticism.

Some argue that if progress is tied to theories of social development and learning, the idea of a democratic progress risks ignoring atrocities, unconventional demands for political change, and contextual differences between worldviews and forms of understanding (Allen 2016). A teleological conceptualization of progress, moreover, feeds into anxieties about democratic backsliding. It is, however, only one of many possibilities for approaching the task of sustaining the democratic project (see Wolkenstein 2022). The concept of renewal, for instance, is also forward-looking, but it does not require a commitment to a linear version of the history of democratic development. Renewal is the process of constantly questioning social and political reality to recognize and address challenges. It tells a history of ups and downs, recoveries and relapses without an end. In this process, members of a society give each other the task of constituting society so that it can renovate the commitment to a shared normative ideal that is expressed in social and political relations.

Democratic theories that aim to trigger a process of renewal should find an appropriate grounding that keeps the diagnostic endeavor in motion and motivates ameliorative actions under changing circumstances. While the diagnostic task supports demands for renewal, the normative task galvanizes agents into meaningful social and political change.

It is against this backdrop that one should approach arguments for democratic renewal in contemporary political theory. What is the conceptual core of the democratic project? Does such a conceptual core express a normative ideal? Can the normative ideal provide us with a new lens to diagnose social and political relationships? Can the normative ideal motivate meaningful political action in the present?

These are the difficult questions Sofia Näsström tackles with theoretical ambition in *The Spirit of Democracy: Corruption Disintegration, Renewal* (*SoD*). Näsström, sets herself the tasks of unearthing the normative core of democracy, challenging doomsayers, and reorienting political action in a genuinely democratic fashion. She calls for a shift of focus among scholars of democracy from the search for a perfect overlap between popular sovereignty and democratic practices to what differentiates democracy from other political lifeforms (3-4). According to Näsström, democracies express a fundamental commitment to the principle of emancipation: that is, a commitment to sharing equally the burdens and uncertainties of political life (59). Individuals who may fundamentally disagree about the purpose and direction of society nonetheless *can*, and *ought to* make collectively binding decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Unlike monarchies and forms of despotism, democracies therefore give people with different viewpoints the opportunity to co-decide what they think are the right responses to problems of shared concern, to fail in their judgments, and to reconsider their decisions.

Näsström argues that it is with reference to the principle of emancipation and its ramifications for our conceptualization of the status of individuals as active participants in processes of decision-making that we should assess existing political and social arrangements. The principle of emancipation is like “an immanent democratic yardstick” (223) by which one can judge attempts at renewing the democratic project. In recognizing that all individuals should have the capacity to participate in democratic decision-making, it channels “present-day uncertainties into a demand for equality within, across, and beyond existent classes of people” (157).

The contributions to this Critical Exchange tackle key issues for the development of a theory of democratic renewal. At the heart of Näsström’s critique of rethinking democracy around a sovereign people is a skepticism about the homogenizing and anti-pluralistic implications of the ideal of a unified collective with a singular will. In response, Sharon Krause suggests that sovereignty is not necessarily undivided but can, in fact, be pluralized: there are countervailing sites of authority among political institutions, controversies that cut across the economic, political, and social domains, and modes of institutional and noninstitutional mobilization. If sovereignty can be pluralized, Krause argues, a democratic emancipatory program should value the sovereignty of the many different people who can judge and decide the purpose of society from their different perspectives.

Steven Klein’s contribution takes up the idea that substantial social rights should enable joint decisions under uncertainty, which arises from Näsström’s principle of emancipation which expresses a commitment an equal sharing of the burdens and uncertainties of political life. Klein examines our relationship with the future under a capitalist system in which technological and economic transformations destabilize social institutions and replace collective political judgements with machine-learning algorithms. Under these circumstances, he argues, it is certainly important to rethink the provision of social rights through a robust welfare state. But we must also reimagine strategies for exercising collective democratic agency.

Taking a similar approach to the transformation of the precarity of the working class into an opportunity for advocating forms of welfare chauvinism and anti-immigration policies, Enrico Biale also explores the question of meaningful political change in the here and now. While the principle of emancipation should not be understood as a blueprint for immediate political action, Biale argues that it is critical to develop political ideas that agents of change can recognize as theirs. When they can commit to a political ideal, agents of change will be motivated to join long-term projects that can challenge well-established but unjust economic and social structures.

As an alternative to Näsström’s defense of the principle of emancipation, Federica Liveriero proposes a principle of legitimacy by which democratic decisions are legitimate when all subjects can be described as authors of such decisions. On this view, political decisions should be the result of a broad program of reforms which should empower people as potential decision-makers.

The contributions to this symposium cast light on several possible approaches to democratic renewal and the task ofsustaining the democratic project. Over centuries of evolution and transformation, progress and regress, democracy has proven to be malleable (Kloppenberg 2016) because different actors—whether in political institutions, economic activities, or personal relationships—have come to see democracy as something more than a system of government. Democracy is a commitment to collective self-determination that should be visible in the procedures through which we reach decisions, in the ways we generate new demands for change, and in how we react to crises and phases of widespread disillusionment.

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